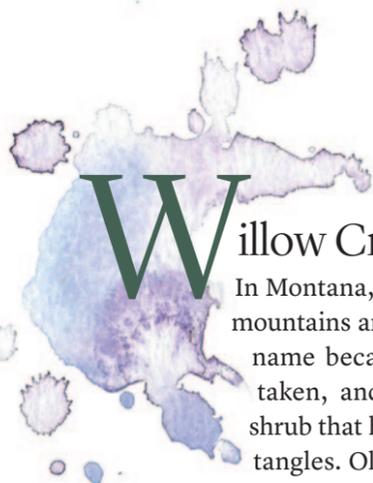


At HOME
on WILLOW
CREEK

BY ANDREW MCKEAN
ART BY STAN FELLOWS

Willow Creek is nowhere. It's one of countless unremarkable prairie streams too small and intermittent to float a boat but too deep and changeable to cross easily. Even during dry seasons, getting across requires finding a place where the sheer banks have sloughed away between pools of stagnant, fish-stranding water. Mule deer and cows cross here, and so do I, when I want to hunt the grassy coulees and crumbling badlands on the other side. ▶▶





Willow Creek is everywhere.

In Montana, dozens of Willow Creeks drain mountains and scour prairies. Most got their name because Beaver Creek was already taken, and also from the narrow-leafed shrub that holds their banks in thickets and tangles. Old-timers call it “coyote willow,” maybe because, wherever it grows, the banks are tacky with drying mud stitched with the tracks of wild canids snaking in and out of its shadows to surprise a jackrabbit or pounce on a vole. Thin and limber as shattercane and spiked with tiny yellow flowers in the spring, coyote willow is ever a sapling, throwing scarcely enough shade to cool a panting cow. In the throbbing summer heat, willow groves smell like the creosote ties of an old railroad.

In the fall, Willow Creek is everything. In a landscape defined by inch-high woolgrass and razoring winds, it’s a magnet for open-country mule deer that bed in its buckbrush bends and breed in leafless rattling thickets. In winter, sharp-tailed grouse descend out of the icy sky to tuck into stream-side willows alongside twitchy prairie cottontails.

Willow Creek could be anywhere. Except mine is right here, meandering drunkenly through my northeastern Montana homeland as it transports the slurried prairie, stacking three miles of ropey twists into every map mile as it makes its way to the Milk River.

For most of the year, my Willow Creek is nearly dry. If it weren’t for stick-and-mud beaver dams around every other bend that impound greasy water, I could hunt along its cracked bed for miles, invisible to bucks bedded on the adobe ridges. But for several weeks in late spring, Willow Creek swells and churns with spring runoff, a perilous boilage of cottonwood limbs and bloated yearlings, and, during an especially heavy flood a few years ago, rough-cut planks from a washed-out county bridge miles upstream.

Willow Creek never raises its voice, even during these

unsettling deluges. There are no chattering rapids here. Instead, the creek’s gurgle deepens as it swallows gumbo banks and rootwads in suctioning swirls. Its flow sometimes multiplies so silently and astonishingly that I’ve awakened to floodwater fingering across its mile-wide valley, an instant lake that reflects the sunrise with an intensity of light that I associate with seashores and snowfields. When the spring melt lifts and breaks ice into truck-size blocks, the creek mutters in the dark as tectonic plates of ice grind their way downstream, flattening willows and scarring the trunks of streamside cottonwoods.

While it can rise overnight, Willow Creek takes days and even weeks to recede, like a friend holding a grudge. The valley—after the water returns to the steep-sided channel—is hard to cross, all sucking mud and shipwrecked trees in a typically dry and treeless prairie. When floods arrive in the fall from November storms, I’m reduced to simply watching, through binoculars or spotting scopes, a parade of handsome bucks on the unreachable other side, killable but for the trench of hungry water between them and me.

Why do I care? There’s no shortage of deer or dry land elsewhere in my county. But those places don’t hold me in their sway, and a buck hunted on nearby Antelope Creek or Bitter Creek somehow isn’t the same as one that shares my unremarkable valley, hearing the same coyotes yip, waiting for the sun under the same high horizon.

Its unremarkability is the source of my affection for Willow Creek, which fisheries biologists have told me is defined as a “degraded” waterway. Its banks are unstable and its flow is too sporadic to support a fishery. Wildlife biologists similarly dismiss much of the watershed’s terrestrial habitat. Bank-holding riparian shrubs, the shady, buggy domain of summering sage-grouse, are the first to be grazed down by cows droughted out of the uplands. The adobe flats in its headwaters 50 miles to the southeast fail to slow precipitation, contributing to the cycle of flash floods followed by months of anemic alkaloid seeps that dry into cracked hardpan.

But degradation has a surprising upside. If Willow Creek were handsomer, I’d have more people clamoring to know her. If she held fish worth catching, I’d have to manage access

and expectations. If her flows were consistent, I’d be obligated to share her with floaters. Willow Creek’s impaired condition means she is largely unnoticed.

To me, that reduction has an unexpected amplitude. Once the creek dries down into a bed of cracking mud, I retrace steps I’ve taken for the past 20 seasons, passing bends where my kids killed their first deer, where I can sometimes jump a wood duck on a tannic pool skimmed with spear-head-shaped yellow leaves, and where buffalo bones poke out of a cutbank.

It’s in these times that Willow Creek switches from antagonist to partner. Mule deer that easily vault over barbed-wire fences don’t test the creek’s friable banks. Instead, they tuck into the willows, and if the wind is right and my approach is patient I can sometimes deliver an arrow or a bullet to a deer that thinks it’s hidden by the screen of slender trees.

Later, when the creek freezes solid, trapping carp and fat-head minnows in blocks of brackish ice, I walk it with a shotgun. On days when the snow blows sideways, pheasants and sharptails tuck into streamside cover, watching for danger from overland, not from below. When flushed, roosters rocket straight into the pewter sky, squacking with surprise and betrayal, then fall to the ice, their gaudy plumage the only color of a monochromatic day.

Though I’m familiar with every brushy bend of Willow Creek through my place, upstream it’s a wilderness of remote hardpan flats and sage wastes, desolate tableland where even pronghorn don’t linger. It would take three days of walking from my house to reach its headlands in the rim-rock country that tips south into the Missouri River Breaks. Along the way are skeletons of homesteads, stranded in the gumbo like beached boats, ribs of frame walls, shards of pottery, rusty bed springs, and the occasional harrow, teeth rusted and blunted from seasons of unrequited efforts to turn this thin-lipped prairie into blooming field.

Way up Willow Creek are the sources of gossip that become history after a hundred years. The relics of the German’s shack, wallpapered with worthless banknotes from the Weimar Republic. Homestead remains of a family that froze to death when they ran out of punky wood and cow pies, and

finally shingles, to burn. The lichened rocks on a grave dug in a hurry after an argument back in town.

Overlooking the creek and the leavings of those temporary honyockers, I find circles of head-sized stones that held the buffalo-hide skirts of Assiniboine teepees against the shouldering wind. Their campsites confirm that I’m only the most recent hunter to track deer into the willows.

Above the valley and the teepee rings, this is a country of squares, section lines and linear horizons, plumb-straight fences and alternating strips of winter wheat and summer fallow. This is one reason Willow Creek captivates me: It’s the only disobedient feature on a landscape that’s been mostly tamed by township and survey stake.

Meanders are a gift of moving water, whether it’s a tasty trout riffle on a mountain creek or the lazy comma of a prairie catfish river’s inside bend.

On a live stream, curves slow the descent of water, but they also ensure that every moment is distinct from the one just before it, or the one yet to come. It’s unimportant whether you use that knowledge to catch a fish or time a leap or shoot a buck. It’s the unrepeatable moment that matters.

Across the West, including my neglected corner of Montana, public agents and irrigation masters have an enduring affection for reservoirs. What greater gift could land re-claimers give to arid regions than consistent water?

But the bargain never seems square. Many like me have stood on the lifeless, baked-mud shore of a drawn-down Western reservoir and wondered at the alternative—a wild-eyed creek or cheerful river chattering its way through a handsome valley, somehow made bigger by moving water.

If dam-builders only see degraded Willow Creek at flood stage, its greedy whorls lapping at bankside willows and gobbling up real estate, it’s an easy argument to tame it. But then the water drops and the streamside grass thickens calves and fattens fawns. Thrushes and meadowlarks and black-and-white kingbirds chatter and flit in glossy new buckbrush. On hazy summer evenings, the hills soften to purple and gray. At the center of it all is the creek, obeying only the pull of gravity, distributing exactly as much life as it withdraws. 🐾

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